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AUTHOR Miller, Jerry W.
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ABSTRACT

Accreditation issues raised by the use of educational technology not being substantially different from those raised during the decade of the seventies by the nontraditional education movement, there are several lessons about accreditation issues which are applicable to both movements. For example, credentialing and accreditation issues are inseparable. The major concern of accrediting should address the question of whether the recognition conferred--a degree, certificate, or course credits--actually are a proxy for validated learning. If the educational outcomes of instruction by educational technology are intended to be credit applicable towards a degree, testing and certification should go hand-in-hand with course and curriculum design. This involves qualified faculty. However, assuming that not all instruction available through educational technology will be sponsored by colleges and universities, thought should be given to adapting the ACE credit equivalency recommendation process or the CLEP model to help the learners achieve recognition by accredited colleges and universities. The beneficial aspects of formal recognition for learning should not be overlooked. Degrees, and even course credits, are social accolades for learning which motivate people to learn. (Author/LLS)

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Accreditation and Technology Issues

Jerry W. Miller
Director, Division of Academic Affairs
and Institutional Relations
American Council on Education

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Accreditation and Technology Issues

Introduction

Accreditation issues raised by the use of educational technology are not substantially different from those raised during the decade of the seventies by the nontraditional education movement.[1] Simply put, with the coming of nontraditional education, of which instruction by technology is a part, judgments about quality now have to be made on the basis of considerations that go beyond educational and decision-making processes, educational resources, and qualifications of faculty to focus more on educational outcomes.

The nontraditional education movement put accreditation into a role that it has not historically savoured. The accreditation fraternity through the years has preferred to emphasize the improvement of quality function of accreditation over providing assurances about the validity of credentials awarded by colleges and universities. This latter function of accreditation embodies the consumer protection concern that came to the fore in the early seventies and which now may be receding as the primary raison d'etre of accreditation.

In elaborating these points, it is necessary to review some key historical aspects of accreditation and some of its fundamental assumptions. Only then can the accreditation issues raised by nontraditional education be understood.

Meaning of Accreditation

Accredited status awarded by a recognized accrediting agency is a public expression of confidence in the expertise and integrity of the accredited instit tio in meeting the minimum standards of educational quality. But that status means many things to many people.

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1 For purposes of this presentation, instruction by technology is referred to as nontraditional education.

Its most common meaning to the public at large, although rarely if ever stated so directly or frankly by an accrediting agency, hinges on the question of whether the degree or course credits earned at the institution in question are any good. How does the degree compare in the marketplace with degrees conferred by other institutions? Will it be valued and rewarded by employers and other educational institutions?

Questions regarding the validity of recognition conferred for educational accomplishment by an educational institution stem from the uses of educational credentials in our society. Credentials is a broadly used term, often expressed in common parlance as he or she "has the credentials for the job." The speaker of such a phrase most often is referring to formal recognition of educational accomplishment conferred by an accredited institution, although successful work experience is sometimes a factor. The frequency with which the reference is made points up the central role of credentials in a complex, highly mobile, and technological society. Firms, clients, or patients in need of esoteric services, when left solely to their own devices, are often unable or unwilling to make judgments about the qualifications of a person to do a competent job. Formal credentialing, therefore, becomes an important social service and is likely to become even more important as society and the economy becomes more complex and specialized. Thus, the validity of educational credentials, or educational standards as some might prefer, will likely to a continuing public concern. To emphasize a point made earlier, accreditation will likely remain important in assuring the validity of degrees and other recognition, such as course credits, conferred by educational institutions.

Accreditation Considerations

With particular reference to the validity of recognition for educational accomplishment, accreditation has sought to assure the following: (1) that there is a faculty that is expert in the requisite fields of knowledge and skills, (2) that the faculty has defined the requirements for the award of the degree, (3) that the faculty has determined how these requirements can be met by the student seeking to qualify, and (4) that reliable and valid processes are in place and used to test the knowledge and to measure the skills certified by the degree. If such steps have been taken, there should be a high correlation between the award and the competence of the holder.

Before the days of nontraditional education life was much more simple for the accreditation community. The evidence it required in order to make a public expression of confidence in an institution was more straight forward. Accrediting concerns were manifested differently by the several agencies in the way they wrote their standards. Generally and somewhat over simplified here for purposes of brevity, the standards, however stated, dealt with the following concerns: qualifications of the faculty; resources available to the faculty and student body (classrooms, laboratories, library); proper decision-making processes and organizational considerations essential to support the educational process; and qualifications of students admitted to undertake study. Educational outcomes that speak to the validity of the degrees awarded, while not ignored, were not the focus of the accreditation. To a very great extent, accreditation assumed satisfactory educational outcomes if all the other considerations were met. And those assumptions had a great deal of validity.

Accreditors lives became a great deal more complicated with the advent of nontraditional education. Interest in nontraditional education was accompanied by a movement to accelerate the practices and to improve the procedures by which educational institutions could, with confidence and validity, award credit for learning that was achieved outside the formal sponsorship of accredited colleges and universities. All the traditional benchmarks on which accreditation has relied for so long were not as sacrosanct now, if indeed they were valid considerations at all.

It was in the seventies that the term "educational outcomes" came to the fore not only for curriculum designers but also for accreditors. Educational process, organizational structure, resources--while obviously still important to a quality educational experience--were nonetheless becoming less critical benchmarks to support the accreditation decision.

Accreditation still tilts in the direction of its traditional considerations but it has made great strides philosophically and technically in accommodating the nontraditional educational movement. But with that desirable shift, accreditation has fueled its critics, a substantial body of which has always been around to yelp at the heels of the accreditors but few of whom offer constructive suggestions for improvement. Many critics say accreditation has gone too far in accommodating nontraditional educational approaches and as a result educational standards in the great majority of institutions are slipping.

Many astute educational leaders agree the standards are slipping. But to blame it all on nontraditional education goes far beyond reason. There is as much evidence of educational malpractice in the traditional classroom on the traditional campus using traditional faculty and traditional

methods as there is in the nontraditional sector. The school board which announced that it would administer a basic test to prospective teachers to assure they could handle the language at the 10th grade level said a great deal about standards in the traditional classroom. Those prospective teacher hires were not likely to have been enrolled in a nontraditional English composition course or to have been taught English composition by the school of education, to cite another whipping boy.

Role of Faculty

The gatekeeper of standards for student accomplishment is the testing and certification function of faculty, whether it be traditional or nontraditional education. Expert judgment, given the nature of the educational process and the limitations of educational measurement, is essential. And the greatest critical mass of expert judgment resides in a qualified faculty.

How a qualified faculty spends its time may shift substantially as it becomes more involved in nontraditional education. Faculty traditionally have performed these tasks: course and curriculum design, instructing, testing and certifying, counseling, and, in some cases, research. With nontraditional education approaches, faculty may need to spend more time testing and evaluating learning (including that attainted outside institutional sponsorship), certifying, and counseling students on ways to achieve their educational objectives through nontraditional means.

The majority of faculty, many believe, are uncomfortable with their testing and certifying responsibilities. Although always a critically important responsibility in terms of the student interests and welfare

and the maintenance of academic standards, few faculty have been formally trained in this highly complex function. They are most comfortable in carrying out the testing and certifying responsibility when they also have first-hand knowledge of and are in control of the subject matter materials in which the student is being tested and accomplishments certified.

In dealing with accreditation issues relevant to educational technology, it is important to mention two other forms of "accreditation" which are known by other terms so as not to confuse them with the activities of accrediting agencies. The two are course equivalency evaluations and standardized testing.

The American Council on Education has since 1945 evaluated formal military training, using teams of faculty from accredited institutions who teach comparable subject matter on their home campuses, to establish a formal military course's credit equivalency in the college curriculum. These judgments rendered by faculty under guidelines and procedures approved by the Council become ACE's credit recommendations. This process was extended in 1975 to courses offered by business and industry. The recommendations, accepted by the majority of colleges and universities, are a useful and valid means of providing recognition for learning attained in such settings. In this manner, students can combine such learning with further study at colleges and universities to achieve their educational objective, usually a degree.

The Educational Testing Service and the College Entrance Examination Board have for several years combined their resources to make available the College Level Examination Program. A high percentage of institutions

use the examinations to evaluate learning attained in a variety of ways and apply the satisfactory results of such testing towards degree requirements.

To return to an earlier point, a key consideration in both the ACE programs and the ETS-College Board effort is the use of faculty experts in making the evaluative judgments and in designing and reviewing the examinations.

What is the significance of the above background for accreditation issues in educational technology? What lessons can be learned by educational technology from the nontraditional education movement? Several are suggested:

1. Credentialing and accreditation issues are inseparable. The major concern of accrediting should address the question of whether the recognition conferred—a degree, certificate, or course credits--actually are a proxy for validated learning.
2. If the educational outcomes of instruction by educational technology are intended to be credit applicable towards a degree, testing and certification should go hand-in-hand with course and curriculum design. This involves qualified faculty.
3. Assuming not all instruction available through educational technology will be sponsored by colleges and universities, thought should be given to adapting the ACE credit equivalency recommendation process or the CLEP model to help the learners achieve recognition by accredited colleges and universities. Even in cases where it is

sponsored by an institution but it is also open broadcast, some may participate who later want to earn credit.

4. The beneficial aspects of formal recognition for learning should not be overlooked. Degrees, and even course credits, are a social accolade for learning which motivate people to learn. Testing and grading are also important because many learners want to be assured they have accomplished something worthwhile.

In summary, the use of qualified faculty in making educational policy for instructional technology and in testing and certifying learning outcomes is essential. Given proper attention to that concern, there should be no other insurmountable accreditation issues.

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